Renilde Vervoort, ***'Vrouwen op den besem en derghelijck ghespoock'. Pieter Bruegel en de traditie van hekserijvoorstellingen in de Nederlanden tussen 1450 en 1700*** (Dissertatie Nijmegen 2011, Nijmeegse Kunsthistorische Studies 19; Nijmegen: Stichting Nijmeegse Kunsthistorische Studies, 2011, 318 pp., ISBN 978 94 91226 02 1); Guido Marnef (ed.), ***Tovenaars, heksen en een miraculeus beeld. De omgang met het bovennatuurlijke in het hertogdom Brabant (16de-17de eeuw)*** (Special issue *Trajecta* 18:4 (2009) 289-400).

There was a time when Low Countries historians were in the vanguard of witchcraft research worldwide. When in 1987 *Nederland Betoverd* (The Netherlands Enchanted), a collection of no fewer than 22 essays edited by Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Willem Frijhoff, came out, it drew attention to a range of understudied phenomena, such as the role played by cunning folk in engendering witchcraft persecutions and the persistence of magical beliefs well into the modern period. The essays illustrated the peculiar (let us not say enlightened) position occupied by the Dutch Republic within the history of the early modern witch-hunt. What Gijswijt-Hofstra would later call the 'Dutch variant' helped consign the idea of an early modern English *Sonderweg* to the dustbin. Rather than postulating further crude geographical divides, the volume (quickly translated into English) painted a rich tapestry of regional variations in belief and action. The project had its defects. Curiously, the interests of the research group used the current, rather than past boundaries of the Netherlands to demarcate the scope of the project, and hence the project never encompassed the especially understudied Spanish Netherlands. After important studies in the early 1990s of the provinces of Holland and Flanders by Hans de Waardt and Jos Monballyu respectively little of note has been accomplished until the two volumes under consideration here.

One area in which both the Northern and Southern Netherlands were particularly prominent is the visual representations of witches. Renilde Vervoort's catalogue of works by Netherlandish artists depicting elements of witchcraft belief contains no fewer than 145 items for the period from 1450 to 1700. The accompanying study lucidly charts changes within the visual language of witchcraft within this period and throws up some fascinating details (both anecdotal and visual) in the process, such as the fact that the Antwerp painter David II Teniers used his wife as a model for one of the witches attending his sabbath. Vervoort in her study is surely right to dismiss speculation about

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scepticism lurking within the visual codes of works by some painters (notably Jacques de Gheyn II) and she instead emphasizes the commercial aspects involved; drawings, paintings, and engravings were generally commissioned either by a buyer or, in the case of the prints, by a publisher. Vervoort stresses the importance of both the educational and entertainment aspects of these representations; and if anything, I would put an even greater stress on the latter. Historians are slowly beginning to recognize the entertainment value which demonological works by men such as Nicolas Remy (who wrote his *Demonolatry* during his vacation) and Pierre Le Loyer had for contemporaries and, indeed, the authors themselves. Vervoort also argues persuasively that a phantasy world such as the witches sabbath would be a technical challenge to an artist one which was accordingly eagerly embraced by young artists keen to show off their skills.

Yet, her main argument about the crucial role played by the two witchcraft engravings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder does not wholly convince me. Vervoort suggests that the ca. 1565 engravings in question, which she relabels *Saint James combats Witchcraft and Sorcery* and *Saint James exposes Witchcraft and Sorcery*, were inspired by a learned adviser (probably a theologian) who favoured witchcraft persecutions. Yet, it seems that Vervoort wants to have it both ways; the prints are first represented as a summary of demonological discourse in comic strip format (99) but elsewhere Bruegel's own visual language is cast as distinct from the demonological texts (148). The focus of both prints (and their original Latin captions) is on the male magician Hermogenes (although he is not identified by name), female witches only appear in the first print to make way for demonic jugglers in the second. Neither presents us with a witches sabbath therefore and demonic copulation or seduction is altogether lacking. The fate of the magician – about to be ripped to pieces by his own demons at God's command – is certainly not meant to be a standard one. Indeed, the idea of devils being called upon by a saint to destroy witches would have presented difficulties for orthodox theologians. The influence of Bruegel is suggestive in some aspects (most notably the image of the witch leaving through a chimney), but these are hardly demonological articles of faith. Vervoort's attempt to make Bruegel act as a 'hinge pin' (*scharnierfunctie*) is reminiscent of early historical studies of demonology which discussed later demonological works only in terms of the influence of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, ignoring the ways in which every author made demonology his own. The forceful insistence on Bruegelian reception blemishes to some extent the author's otherwise commendable discussion of subsequent artists.

The second volume is a special issue of the journal *Trajecta*, which comes out of a collaborative doctoral project run by the University of Antwerp. In three short articles Sonja Deschrijver, Vrajabhùmi Vanderheyden, and Anneleen Perneel present some of their initial findings. All three contributions are a rewarding read for the marvelous details they reveal alone. The archival material studied contributes to our understanding of religious life in the Southern Netherlands during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century in ways that official ecclesiastical documents cannot. Sonja Deschrijver's study of

the city of Den Bosch reveals not only concerns for the powerful effects (real or imagined) of words and spells, but also the scheming of a local governor, who used the testimony of a devil-invoking fortune teller to frame a rival for theft. Bhumi Vanderheyden's study of Lier tells of 'unwitching' (*onttovering*) priests and a suspected witch who only attended church to find a new maid (according to the girl then in her employment). Anneleen Perneel's study of the Marian shrine at Duffel lays bare the rivalry between political and religious agents, all attempting to appropriate the shrine and its prestige. All three studies do much to further deconstruct past historical dogmas, most notably the distinction made between religion and magic by Keith Thomas and the top-down implementation of the Decrees of the Council of Trent. There is no doubt that the outcome of this project will shed a flood of new light on the religious practices of the laity in the Duchy of Brabant. To what extent the research will contribute to a wider understanding of early modern witchcraft belief or the Catholic Reformation remains to be seen. Previous local studies of witchcraft belief have helped tear down existing structures, but the process of building new ones has proved surprisingly difficult. Nevertheless, the evidence from the ruins laid bare so far is fascinating.

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